

Naija Marxisms

Revolutionary Thought in Nigeria

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Introduction

When I decided to write this book on Nigerian Marxist thinkers with a survey of the Nigerian socialist movement, both my academic, and my lay friends were startled, whether in Yola or in London, in Jeddah, in Hungary or in Israel. Is this not an arcane subject in the extreme? Is there, really, such a thing as Nigerian Marxism? Does this topic have any relevance in the 21st century? A friend in Jeddah advised me to tackle the issue of the new wave of Nigerian Islamism instead. Multiple others opined that I should focus exclusively on Boko Haram. I am grateful to all of them for their well-meant caveats, but the more I delved into the world of the Nigerian left, the more fascinated I became, and the more determined I felt to pursue the topic.

My interest in the subject was strengthened by a number of factors. First, I knew that Nigerian Marxism was far from dead. Indeed, as a Lecturer in Politics at the American University of Nigeria (AUN), I was fortunate to meet Gramscians such as Usman A. Tar (he was responsible for our department's mock accreditation) and the fiery Trotskyite Edwin Madunagu of *The Guardian* (Nigeria), who in Calabar opened not only his private library for me but the world of the Nigerian left. My old friend at AUN, Bill Hansen (a hero of the civil rights movement in the US,¹ now an expatriate professor in Adamawa state and a lifelong Marxist) had known Yusufu Bala Usman, one of the best Marxist historians of Northern Nigeria – I was to devour Bala Usman's works in the course of my research for this book. Still, I was less surprised by all this since Marxism as an intellectual pursuit is a stock feature in many countries that refuses to wither away. What really struck me was the fact that Nigerian labour leaders evoked ideas and images of class warfare very openly, as in the January 2012 fuel subsidy strikes, when 4–5 million women and men blocked the arteries of Nigerian commerce, while I was stranded in Yola because aeroplanes did not fly during the strike. Many Nigerian labour leaders still refer to themselves as 'Comrade', and labour personalities such as Dipo Fashina of the Academic Staff Union of Universities and Hassan Sunmonu, formerly of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), or the indestructible Femi Aborisade continue to be Marxists, along with feminist socialists such as Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, Ifeoma Okoye or the

expatriate thinker Amina Mama. The ‘Occupy’ movements in the West drew inspiration from the well of Marxian, socialist and communist traditions. But in Nigeria, the connection between the anti-capitalist counterculture and its 20th-century antecedents is even more visible to the naked eye. Marxist-inspired movements are still to be found in the country. The late Chinua Achebe’s party, the People’s Redemption Party, the oldest political party in existence in the country, with roots in 1978 Kaduna, is still in operation, and it proudly displays its Marxian inspirations. Adams Aliyu Oshiomhole, former leader of the NLC, has been the governor of Edo state since 2007, elected on the platform of the Action Congress (which is allied with his own Labour Party, a social democratic party with links to the NLC). There are a number of diehard Marxist parties, such as the Democratic Socialist Movement and its Socialist Party of Nigeria (associated with the Committee for Workers’ International under Segun Sango’s leadership), the Socialist Workers’ League (Femi Aborisade, Baba Aye) and the National Conscience Party with a left-leaning progressive agenda. Two major newspapers, *This Day* and *The Guardian*, are sympathetic to the cause of the left. Party ‘hard-core’ membership also reads periodicals such as the *Workers’ Alternative*² and the Democratic Socialist Movement website³ (both also issue pamphlets, booklets and leaflets).

Their core message is not *passé*. On the contrary, it seems to be one of the possible answers to the problems posed by the Nigerian condition itself to the country, to Africa and to the world at large: most especially, unhindered corporate tyranny. The idea that militant Marxism is dead also smacks of Eurocentrism in the case of Westerners, and Slavophilia in the case of Russians and other Eastern Europeans; in large sections of the world outside Europe, militant Marxism is clearly on the rise. It is the second biggest ‘security threat’, in the form of the Naxalite movement (with Maoist inspirations) against the Indian state. It is the single strongest political force in Nepal. Marxism, through especially Istvan Meszaros’ works, has influenced the late Hugo Chávez’s policies in Venezuela, and a host of other Central and South American countries beyond Cuba. It still influences the policies of the Chinese Communist Party, especially in matters such as China’s unique refusal to do away with the peasants’ ‘right to land’ that manifests in the ban on capitalist private land ownership and that is celebrated by thinkers such as Samir Amin.⁴ The mainstream view on China and its institutional relationship to Marxist theory is that in that country an organisationally Leninist vanguard party is less concerned with Marxism as an ideology with actual policy implications⁵ than with Leninism which provides an organisational methodology for rule in the technical sense. General-Secretary

Xi Jin-ping, however, is thought by some to be orchestrating a conscious return to Marx in the country and there are indications that the Chinese state might even engage with some aspects of foreign, including Western, Marxist thought.⁶

The Nigerian condition presents some very difficult questions to the observer. An entire subchapter of this book is devoted to a survey of that general condition. Every researcher of Nigeria ends up doing so, because the ‘Nigeria *problematique*’ is simply inescapable for anyone who spent time in the country and knows how bad its condition really is. When I suggest that Marxist-inspired analysis and Marxian answers might be part of the solution, this is not so easily chalked up to a left-wing agenda on my part. Indeed, it was none other than John Campbell, former United States ambassador and currently Council on Foreign Relations Fellow, the single most important US expert on Nigeria, who aired the view that Nigeria might well still produce a Fidel Castro.⁷ *Nota bene*, he did not say that Cuban, North Korean or any other saboteurs, agents or spies might produce just such a leader: he thought that the Nigerian condition itself might. Obviously, for John Campbell and for United States foreign policy, the emergence of a Castro in Nigeria would be a very unwelcome development.

It would be foolish to discount the Nigerian socialists’ many and varied works, their movement, their toil and their thoughts, on the sole ground that they and their activist friends have not captured political power in Nigeria historically – if for no other reason than for the fact that they still might. In May 2013, for the first time since 1967, the Nigerian air force conducted attacks on home territory as part of the government’s continued fight against Boko Haram, their Islamist menace. What is happening in the north-east of Nigeria might very well bring unexpected developments in this decade, and a social revolution is arguably the only one among them that offers any hope of change for the better.

This book, first and foremost, is a history of socialist ideas and of left-leaning thinkers, and in it the history of the socialist movement is presented as the larger milieu that those alternative ideas grew out of. I devote a chapter to the movement to provide the necessary framework for understanding the works themselves. This is more than has appeared in the literature on the subject so far, but hardly a complete narrative. There is a technical reason for this relative silence: writing the detailed academic history of the movement would necessitate multiple trips to all Nigerian states, a focus on oral history and on personal archives (as public archives are so random in Nigeria), and an altogether different methodology. But it was not only for those negative reasons that I opted to write on Nigerian thinkers more than on Nigerian strikes. First, it

was because these works outline alternatives to the existing grim reality endured by millions. Second, because those books were so well written, so entertaining, so stimulating, dense, humorous, witty, apt, and so singularly clever. The world has discovered literary giants such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ben Okri, Cyprian Ekwensi, Ken Saro-Wiwa, and the new wave of Helon Habila and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, but the world has *not* discovered (or has not rediscovered anyway, since the 1970s/1980s) the prolific Mokwugo Okoye, the fiery Edwin Madunagu, the heterodox Eskor Toyo, and so many others such as Bene Madunagu, Ola Oni, Bade Onimode, Tunji Otegbeye, Niyi Oniororo, Ikenna Nzimiro, Yusufu Bala Usman, Igbo Natufe, Wahab Goodluck, or the early Adebayo Olukoshi. To some extent even radical young Toyin Falola⁸ and Biodun Jeyifo leaned towards Marxism in the 1980s, and so did many more Nigerian Marxian authors who discussed and still discuss vital social, political, economic and cultural issues in their works. In the 1990s, a new cohort appeared, with Claude Ake, the feminist poet Ogundipe-Leslie, the socially committed writer Ifeoma Okoye; and others simply continued their work well into the 1990s and beyond. This book aims to be a testimony to their eloquence, their acumen, their analytical prowess when it comes to the problems of Nigerians. It is also one of the aims of this book to familiarise the Western reader with the frames of references that might make reading those authors somewhat difficult. Their books have all been written entirely in English. At the same time, most of them were written for a readership that claimed a close familiarity with Nigeria and West Africa, including even those that were published by Zed Books or other publishers in the West. It is with that in view that this book has introductory chapters on the literature, on Nigeria's history, on the Nigerian independence movement and especially Zikism, the labour movement and its international aspects, including African Marxism in general, before embarking on the detailed study of Nigerian Marxists' oeuvres.

Beyond the intrinsic intellectual value of these works, the counterculture they sustained had a very visible presence and shaped both social resistance and Nigerian mentalities in a major way. More than that, in this work I shall argue that Marxism was seen as a major legitimising factor even as it was exploited or co-opted by military and civilian governments. Conditions of illegality, and even military rule, did not succeed in eliminating Marxism in Nigeria. Very often, mainstream politicians also felt a need to co-opt it precisely because of its perceived legitimising potential among the African masses. Edwin Madunagu was enticed by Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida to serve on his Political Bureau, Ebenezer Babatope was practically forced to join Sani Abacha's

government, Hassan Sunmonu of the NLC was carefully cultivated by the corrupt plutocrats of the second republic and the military governments of the 1980s. The Marxian counterculture groups at universities, the NLC, illegal party circles and even village communes, were subjected to constant pressure to incorporate into the existing power structures. When formal democracy was reinstated in 1999, Marxism continued to underpin the NLC's efforts, and it is making a comeback today with the Socialist Workers' League, the Movement for Democratic Socialism, Calabar groups, Usman Tar, Amina Mama and literary author Ifeoma Okoye (the author of the novel *The Fourth World*) in the 2000s. This counterculture, beyond exhibiting the most varied versions and understandings of Marxism, has consistently been intellectually inclined, committed to ideas of honesty and authenticity, and artistic in its tastes.

Finding most Nigerian Marxist writings today is very difficult. Not even an introductory reader has ever been published. As Nigerian libraries routinely cleansed these works from their shelves in the 1990s, it is now easier to find a tome by a Nigerian Marxist in a public library in Wales than it is in Nigeria! Many of the books reviewed were available only from small libraries in Wales. Edwin Madunagu's fantastic private library in Calabar, Nigeria, was also among the most important places to find original articles and books. When Nigerian Marxists were still viewed with suspicion and curiosity in the United States, libraries even in places like Missouri bought their books. Via online retailers, I had the opportunity to acquire volumes that had been withdrawn and sold from those US libraries. I have been privileged to be able to read these works that represent for me the best in Nigerian social, political, cultural and economic thought, and that are as entertaining as they are enlightening, while offering analysis and alternatives for the future.

These books are works of African political thought, African economic thought, African feminist thought – indeed, of African philosophy. African thought is being recognised more widely in the West as a valuable field of study in the last 20 years or so. Indeed, it has been a trend to decipher African philosophy from every possible source, including folklore – even Henry Odera Oruka's 'sage philosophy' and 'philosophic sagacity' can be traced back to such an effort. Such projects were emancipatory in their intentions. But Africa is not frozen in time, say in the 1920s. African philosophy may also be found in more recent works on political theory, written by Africans.

The works of Nigerian Marxists demonstrate the falsehood of the witticism commonly repeated by expatriates that 'In our Naija there is no abstraction,' where 'Naija' is simply another word for Nigeria used by Nigerians and expatriates alike. (The word is used as a noun and even as

an adjective in spoken Nigerian English.) The statement, however, is false in the extreme, as the careers of brilliant Nigerian intellectuals in the UK, the US, the UN, or the World Bank, have demonstrated. And Nigerian talent of other kinds is being recognised as well. A recent study focused on how Nigerian ‘tiger moms’ are among the most successful of all immigrants in the United States at inculcating in their progeny the skills for mainstream success.⁹ Nigerians have made notable contributions, not only in literature and the arts but also in intellectual production. And the works of their Marxist thinkers go far beyond day-to-day abstraction to achieve the aesthetic, descriptive and analytic richness of truly great works which merit much closer study. This is the central claim of this book. In this sense, it is only an added bonus that many of these works might be considered definitive, or, at the very least, relevant and profound, regarding many subjects that concern Nigeria, Africa and the world. One need only think of radical Islam, Boko Haram, and the current low-intensity civil war. There have appeared many academic and popular works that expound on the Boko Haram phenomenon and its possible implications for the West. At the same time, most of those articles focused exclusively on how to tackle Boko Haram as a security threat, and propose solutions that will come mainly by way of one or another security apparatus – an impossible task as Boko Haram is a social problem, created by the conditions that prevail in feudal and criminally governed Northern Nigeria. I suspect that the best analysis of the Boko Haram movement by extrapolation is still Yusufu Bala Usman’s *The Manipulation of Religion in Nigeria*, written about another Islamist movement, that of the Maitatsine, but which has historical parallels with Boko Haram and was crushed with military force in 1982–85.¹⁰ Religion itself may be a force for good or for bad, but kowtowing to obscurantist feudal quasi-religious wisdoms will create an explosion in Nigeria, says Yusufu Bala Usman in this slim book with an orange cover that appeared in Kaduna in 1987. At the same time, today not everyone is blind to the nature of the Boko Haram threat, even in the world of Nigerian periodicals. *Workers’ Alternative* has published an editorial about the 2013 state of emergency in the north-east:

The concrete truth about *Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad*, which in Arabic means, ‘People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad’, aka Boko Haram, is that it is nothing but a set of foot soldiers of sections of the Nigerian ruling class that went berserk. It is an arch-reactionary organization that was and is still doing the bidding of sections of the Nigerian elites.¹¹

So writes the editor, who actually names Senator Ndume as someone that has been charged for terrorism in connection with Boko Haram, to prove his point beyond speculation.

Unbeknown to the West, the thinkers of the Nigerian radical left are known in Nigeria, even though their works are often discarded from public libraries. Representations of Marxist intellectuals even appear in popular 'home videos' produced in Nollywood.¹² The otherwise quite marvellous film *Waterfalls*,¹³ featuring Tonto Dikeh and Van Vicker in the lead roles as college sweethearts, features a USSR-returned professor who speaks in Marxist truisms but who is too ignorant to know the difference between metaphor and simile. Enter brilliant freshman Tonto Dikeh, who swiftly corrects our Marxist buffoon's mistakes with feminine charm and gusto, winning a smile from heartthrob Vicker, the most eligible bachelor on campus. This representation of the Marxist professor as uncommonly ignorant at least does not rob him of his African extraction, as the *Gods Must Be Crazy II* does, where the clumsy communist revolutionary in Angola, is actually a Cuban (who were of course present in the country, but by no means constituted the only driving force behind Angolan communism).

It is not hard to see why Nigeria's mainstream entertainment industry, which is obviously a business before being anything else, treats the subject of Marxist intellectuals in precisely this manner. What is harder to understand is how Nigerian intellectuals themselves, positioned in the pinnacles of Western learning, have sometimes disregarded the trains of thought that I call Naija Marxisms. Biodun Jeyifo was the editor of the *Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought*,¹⁴ a towering intellectual and, as a matter of fact, Edwin Madunagu's personal friend and the editor of one of his essay collections. At the same time, in his two-volume encyclopaedia, he included no entry on Marx, or on the one time Muscovite communist turned Pan-Africanist George Padmore, nor on Black Marxism, African Marxism or Afr Marxism, or even on Edwin Madunagu himself. Lest we think that he did not want to appear biased towards his old friend, he also omitted Mokwugo Okoye, Ikenna Nzimiro, Yusufu Bala Usman, Tunji Otegbeye and Ola Oni, while including entries on Joe Slovo (the leader of the South African Communist Party), Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, Amilcar Cabral and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (who were all communists but retain popularity in the West for other reasons), and also on Awolowo and Azikiwe (who were not communists at all, of course) and even (non-Marxist) 'African socialism' of the pro-Western variety. It is not controversial to suggest that Jeyifo's omissions must have been conscious ones. Jeyifo had shown Marxian tendencies in his early career; he was in fact the head of the Academic Staff Union in the turbulent Nigeria

of the early 1980s,¹⁵ and it is unfortunate that he chose to commit to oblivion everything to do with Nigerian Marxism in the important study that he co-edited. His omissions are symptomatic. Guy Martin in his recent *African Political Thought* introduces novel categories such as ‘socialist-populist ideology’ and ‘populist-socialist ideology’ to avoid explicit mention of the Marxist content that many thinkers he deals with so obviously exhibit.¹⁶

In this book I do not intend to engage in cheerleading instead of analysis. Indeed, there are many reasons to worry for Africa, and even more reasons to worry specifically for Nigeria (unless we deliberately confuse the petro-fuelled growth rate of the country’s economy with genuine development). We cannot disregard Patrick Chabal’s bleak view in *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*,¹⁷ based on the meagre premise that oil well owners, luxury chocolate bar importers and road construction companies are doing better now than they did under Sani Abacha. Where I would disagree with Chabal’s Afro-pessimism is not with respect to the immediate future of Africa. Rather, I take issue with his conviction that in Africa absolutely everything is ruled by crude instrumentality, by instant gratification, ultimately, by the power of money. If it were so, then all the thinkers of the Nigerian Marxian left would have turned to neoliberalism or tribalism when China stopped financing revolutionary movements and the USSR fell. Some indeed did, and that was inevitable – think of how many Communist-turned-nationalists one finds in Eastern Europe and ex-Soviet Central Asia today. But people such as Usman A. Tar, Edwin Madunagu, Bene Madunagu, Femi Aborisade, Abiodun Omosu, Baba Aye, Amina Mama, Laoye Sanda, Bamidele Aturu, Chima Ubani, Funmi Adewunmi, Niyi Osundare, Omafume Eonoge, the writers Ifeoma Okoye, Molar Ogundipe-Leslie and Festus Iyayi, perhaps the majority of labour leaders at the NLC, the celebrated lawyer Tunji Braithwaite and others, have not only maintained their political allegiances and Marxian analytical frames of mind but, even more importantly, most of them chose to stay on in a country that is hostile to its intellectuals like few others. Many of them have effectively sacrificed what might have been cushy careers in Western academic institutions to work within Nigeria, to understand Nigeria better or to help Nigeria. Anyone who has ever stayed in Nigeria outside the confines of the Abuja Sheraton knows very well what this entails. Many of these authors have been more than just good academics: they have lived lives that were positively heroic. Many have known the insides of jails, some have been beaten and tortured; some endured hiding, some prosecution. Many had difficulty getting published. All had to fight the hegemonic culture maintained by the criminal, comprador,

bureaucratic bourgeoisie that rules Nigeria: a class bereft of taste, a class that oozes vulgarity. If it is not politically correct from a European to call it that, then let Chinua Achebe speak: it is 'dirty, callous, noisy, ostentatious, dishonest and vulgar'.¹⁸

This book, the first monographic study of Nigerian Marxism, had to be written sooner or later. It is reasonable to ask, however, why exactly a Hungarian researcher should have undertaken the task. Indeed, it is – or it should be – humbling to write on a history that is not one's own. However, without trying to gloss over the obvious difficulties of being a foreigner (and someone who does not hail from a Commonwealth country at that), there may be some advantages resulting from my standpoint. I spent my formative years in socialist Hungary. Linkages between Eastern Europe and the Nigerian socialist movement abounded from the 1940s until 1989. Some authors discussed below were actually schooled in Eastern Europe: Eskor Toyo studied economics in Poland, and even had a book published in Polish. Labour leader Michael Imoudu, Tunji Otegbeye, Wahab Goodluck, socialist feminist Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti and others travelled regularly to Moscow for conferences and for funds to support the socialist movement and labour initiatives, including strikes. The Eastern Europe–Marxist Nigeria link has been recognised and partly documented by the eminent Nigerian historian Hakeem Tijani¹⁹ (whose eminence is matched by his allegiance to the political status quo), but the connection is still awaiting a historian to unearth the exact details in the Russian language in Moscow. At the same time, to reduce Nigerian Marxism to an acolyte movement, funded by Eastern Europeans would be a very erroneous proposition. Even Tunji Otegbeye, leader of the Moscow-sanctioned Marxist party (Socialist Workers' and Farmers' Party), made frivolous remarks about the land of the Soviets in his books, not to mention heterodox thinkers such as Niyi Oniororo or Edwin Madunagu, who condemned Soviet leaders nearly as often as they did Americans. Two Nigerian Marxists, Peter Ayodele Curtis Joseph and Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti were the recipients of the Lenin Peace Prize along with Nasser, Nehru, W.E.B. Du Bois, Angela Davis, Salvador Allende, Pablo Picasso and Nelson Mandela – a sign that the USSR recognised the potential of the Nigerian Marxist movement. I devote a chapter to the international links of the Nigerian Marxist movement: mainly British, East European, Ghanaian, and South African. Indeed, the multifaceted nature of the Nigerian left's international links reminds us that there is more to the international flow of ideas than the metropole–colony relationship.

Through the essays, articles, treatises, analytical tomes and pamphlets written by Nigerian Marxists, a subaltern of sorts spoke, and she spoke

with the voice of a Black Jacobin. Most of their aims stood for radical equality in the vein of veritable levellers. Although one could claim to be, say, a Marxist labour organiser in the 1970s if one had read only the classics of Marxism, it was inevitably of interest for leftists to get acquainted with Marxian takes on issues that more directly concerned their own lives. The tomes discussed in this volume were printed in editions of thousands, often reprinted just months after their first publication. Northern Nigerians such as Yusufu Bala Usman were read and appreciated in the South; Southern Igbos such as Madunagu were inspirations in the North as well as their home constituencies; men read feminists such as Ogundipe-Leslie; women read rugged labour-oriented organisers such as Oniororo. Some, like Imoudu, had the most obvious working-class pedigrees, others were second-generation literates (or, like Ransome-Kuti, fourth-generation literates) but their focus was the same: liberation for ordinary Nigerians. In more than one way, the authors I deal with all belong, many out of choice, to the subaltern class in neocolonial Nigeria.

Capitalist Nigeria is a crime against its own people, say Naija Marxists, with convincing force. The ostentatious Nigerian leadership of the 1980s was one of the first, globally, to introduce structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), ostensibly to revive the country's ailing economy. SAPs in the end deindustrialised Nigeria, forced upon it the worst kind of militarisation of politics, sucked the blood out of its veins and turned it into a barren land of no production, no middle class, few medical doctors (more Nigerian medical doctors practise in the US than in Nigeria!),²⁰ no oil refineries (four of these stand idle while compradors re-import refined petrol!), two hours of electricity a day for most people, very little indoor and no outdoor plumbing, no operational water towers (except in Calabar), no sewage system to speak of, and cities filled with filth that would startle even Engels.

It is not hard to see why a Nigerian academic friend of mine, who had studied in socialist Hungary in the 1980s but who had no socialist political leanings whatsoever, once said over coffee: 'What Nigeria needs is a touch of communism.' For Nigeria today is a sad parody of democracy, a petro state where indecent individualism reigns supreme; a country where every driver uses high beams after dusk, effectively blinding each other, and maiming and even killing innocent bystanders. What is possibly the most dangerous country on earth not involved in a conventional war, however, is full of talented, warm-hearted, open people, people who deserve better from their leaders and honest analysis from their intellectual class. The authors I discuss in this book appear to me to represent that kind of honesty: their voice has not been bought,